

Figure it out Agreement needed on I-40 project

THERE IS little debate about the need for retooling Interstate 40 where it crosses Oklahoma City. The highway carries far more traffic than it was designed to handle when it was built decades ago, and it's in a state of disrepair that makes replacement a necessity.

The \$360 million relocation plan is moving forward, but only haltingly because questions linger about who should pick up the tab. Federal, state and city officials need to settle on a solution soon. That became clear recently when U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook said completion could be delayed by five years, until 2014, if the federal government doesn't get some help from state or local sources.

That's 10 years from now, which is far too long to wait for this important project.

Istook, R-Warr Acres, is a proponent of the Crosstown Expressway project. Along with other members of the congressional delegation, he has helped secure about \$180 million in federal dollars. What Istook doesn't favor is having the entire project funded with federal money, particularly a street-level boulevard that will provide access to downtown. The price tag for that portion of the project is about \$35 million.

The argument by state officials has been that construction of turnpikes in Oklahoma should count as a "soft match" for the state's share of the crosstown project. Istook's response? "That meets the legal requirements but it doesn't generate the federal funds."

Istook is suggesting that local and state leaders explore private-public partnerships to help fund the project. It's an idea the Bush administration plans to push — asking those who will benefit from the improvements to help pay for them, similar to tax-increment financing. Mayor Mick Cornett has said he'll consider the congressman's suggestions.

Istook would like to see more of a commitment from Gov. Brad Henry, who says it's hard for the state to make long-term promises when Congress can't pass a long-term highway plan. For now, the governor prefers to use state funds for repairing our state's roads and bridges, which is understandable.

It's our hope that all parties will resolve to work together, and soon, to find a solution for this ticklish but vital issue.